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Thinking Outside the Glass Box: The Legacy of Michael Ames
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"A Detribalized Anthropology: The Practice of the Museum in
Native American Communities"
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During the difficult years of anthropology's "new
museology" in the 1980s and 1990s, Michael Ames spoke with
clarity and candor of his quandaries negotiating contested
representational politics as Director of the Museum of
Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (a post
he held from 1974 to 1997 and again in an acting capacity
from 2002 - 2004). Reading Ames, I was captivated by his
direct and unambiguous support of indigenous rights. A
Native American doctorate student at Stanford University in
the late 80s, I found myself drowning in post-modern jargon,
desperate to find some foothold in academia that supported
the work I wanted to pursue in repatriation efforts. Ames
made sense to me, so foolishly, I wrote a fan letter asking
if I could study with him.¹ Foolishly, he agreed and thus
began our twenty year friendship. For better or worse, I am
one of Michael Ames's many post-colonial projects.

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There was one thing that I could never quite understand about Ames. In the midst of proposing radical restructuring of museum practice via open-storage techniques, experimental interpretation and collaborative curatorial research, he would often reference his work in South Asia with real nostalgia, almost as if he were drawing parallels with what was immediately unfolding in the explosion of indigenous rights in Canada. I didn't have the insight at the time to really ascertain what connections he was drawing with his previous research in India, nor did I have the interest, given the immediacy of protests and press associated with the repatriation movement. It is only now, in trying to understand what experiences formed his radicalized approach to the museum enterprise that I have come to investigate this linkage. What was the impetus of his museum critique, from where did he draw his references? Who had influenced Ames as he had influenced me?

Ames's early (1961 - 1967) scholarship on Sri Lanka addressing topics such as Sinhalese Buddhism, Indian caste systems, and Western educational influences is richly varied and well-documented.² However, I have chosen to discuss in depth a seminal article he authored in 1976 as a new director of the UBC Museum of Anthropology titled

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"Detribalized Anthropology and the Study of Asian Civilizations."³ I consider this work to be a key transitional narrative to the productive and generative writings he produced in the 80s and 90s on the democratization of museums and indigenous peoples' rights.⁴ In it, Ames outlines the major theories that eventually serve to inform his expansive and inclusive museum project. I will focus on two of these perspectives: analyticism, or a consideration of the structural dimensions of external power, (in particular globalization and capitalism) and detribalization, a term he uses to signal the impossibility of conceptualizing authentic cultural traditions in inherent opposition to modernism.

Ames's "Detribalized Anthropology" clearly suggests that his use of democratization, the opening up of the museum enterprise, was directly linked to the philosophies of Max Weber, whom he indicates provides a "holistic structural theory" for understanding complex non-Western societies. In other words, the primacy for which Ames regarded social and economic systems both in their negative rational sense and their more positive traditional and moral sense fueled his staunch support of the sovereign nationhood of the First Nations peoples of Canada and the United States. In this

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regard, the analyticism Weber supplies trumps the more empirical research trends pursued by anthropologists (especially those working in the 1950s to the 1970s, a period he discusses in some depth) seeking to understand the newly urbanized and complex societies that traditionally served as subjects of anthropological inquiry. Ames's unique contribution of a "detrribalized" anthropology, developed in the context of India's modernization, subsequently provided a foundational premise for his politicized engagement with museums and First Nations peoples.

What exactly is Ames's detrribalized anthropology? His 1976 essay intriguingly concludes, "Primitiveness is the white man's myth, detrribalization is the fact."⁵ Detrribalization effectively characterizes Ames's rejection of traditional anthropology - both in the sense of anthropology from the first half of the twentieth century in which extended contact with the West apparently erased indigenous cultures (the "vanishing race") as well as the anthropology of the second half of the twentieth century in which tradition and modernity stood as mutually exclusive reference points, with tribal cultures on an inevitable lineal trajectory towards assimilation. Each outdated equation begs the

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question of anthropology's ultimate utility, given the disappearance of perceived "primitive peoples" and false notions of authenticity.

Ames resurrects anthropology, as many theorists did under the "new museology" platform, by bringing analytical tools to bear on questions that appear to present as local constructs, such as disputes over control of artistic legacy or historical representations within particular museum contexts. Ames does more than this however, in that he infused the museum enterprise, and thus the anthropological enterprise, with a moral obligation, declaring that museums are "moral educators."⁶

This "higher ground" ethical approach to contested museum representations was richly infused with a Weberian distrust of bureaucratic reproduction. Ames's principled value-infused analysis ultimately helped him navigate successfully between what was frequently considered the museum's oppressive "rationally organized bureaucracy"⁷ and the "adaptive processes"⁸ of traditional societies attempting to secure self representation and control of their material heritage. For Ames, museums have the capacity to behave dangerously akin to factories,

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industrial complexes or even nation-states and thus should be tempered by local knowledge. However, local knowledge itself does not have the capacity to answer to the pervasive force of modern industrial capitalism. In fact, a capitalist critique is ever-present in Ames's approach to the new museology. He easily linked rights to land and resources to the more intangible resources that museums typically deal with, such as access and interpretation of cultural legacies, stating in 1987 that "Cultural autonomy is as important to indigenous people as economic independence."⁹

Ames's evocation of Weber is transparent in this association of cultural and political systems. For instance, Ames's statement, "Legal, political and cultural initiatives have come to take precedence over violent rebellions and messianic retreats as more practical alternatives for those who are vastly outnumbered and steadily absorbed by the nation states that have encompassed them" appears to reference directly Weber's ideal types of legal, traditional and charismatic domination. These areas of congruence suggest Ames was deeply influenced by Weber and provide potent opportunities for future research and analysis.

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Ames's 1976 detribalized platform originates with the discipline's 1950s shift towards the study of non-Western civilizations and away from attempts to research isolated so-called primitive cultures. Listing Kroeber, Redfield, Benedict and Mead as pioneers in the field of the anthropology of civilizations, it is ultimately Milton Singer's research that Ames chooses to discuss as exemplary of this emerging disciplinary trend.

Milton Singer's career documenting India's social change extended from the mid 1950s to the early 1970s, placing him at the outer chronological frontier of Ames's professional trajectory. Ames clearly admired Singer's work as ranking "among the best in the literature" but he also questioned Singer's orientation as a "confirmed empiricist" who is "deeply suspicious of abstract concept and hypotheses derived from general theory."¹⁰ Singer is noted for his interest in causal relations between religion and economics, but it is the impact of capitalism and urbanization evidenced in his text *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* that Ames utilizes for his detribalized treatise.¹¹

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An analysis of Singer's own model of social change provides the template for Ames's discussion. Singer's theory proposes three possible effects of modernization on non-Western civilizations. Traditional institutions (such as Hinduism, joint family and caste) can either: A) resist change and inhibit the process of modernization, B) succumb to a total structural transformation or C) work out a compromise formation through mutually adaptive processes. Singer advocates the third compromise solution and relegates Weber to the first option - resisting change as non-rational. Ames's discussion of these two theorists - Singer and Weber - seeks to rescue Weber and his "structural dimensions" approach to social change from critique by empiricists like Singer who tend to, according to Ames, neglect "the "external constraints imposed by the wider networks of modern capitalism." What is needed, Ames concludes is a "holistic structural theory" capable of tempering inductive empiricism.¹²

A brief reference to First Nations cultural theory as proposed by Ames later in his career exposes the same template for understanding the struggles for First Nations rights in Canada and globally. Writing in 1987, Ames's "Free Indians from Their Ethnological Fate: The Emergence

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of the Indian Point of View in Exhibitions of Indians” positions minorities and “dominated populations” as directly challenged by state policies. He begins this museum essay by stating “Contrary to widespread expectations, the North American Indian is not disappearing” thus dismissing Singer’s option B) above whereby local cultures “succumb to a total structural transformation.” This leaves two options available - A) resist change, thereby inhibiting the process of modernization or C) work out a compromise formation - what Singer calls “adaptive processes.”

Ames’s 1987 “Free Indians...” essay continues, “The [Canadian] Indian population has steadily increased since the early part of this century and Indian cultural distinctiveness persists” - indicating perhaps his alignment with A) resistance to change, a platform linked to Weber, as indicative of traditionalism, uniform types or non-rational and thus non-institutional behaviors. But Ames does not rest with this status quo assumption. He immediately references a type of compromise between loss of culture and rejection of modernization by referencing the central importance of, “the rise of native intelligentsia and pan-tribal social-political solidaritius as indigenous

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peoples advance thorough the educational systems of the dominant societies."¹³ Clearly this perspective speaks to an alignment with Singer's model of social change above, option C) "complementary modernization".¹⁴ In fact, the force of Western education as a primary mediating influence of a globalized capitalist economy was an early concern of Ames which he addressed in 1967 in the article "The Impact of Western Education on Religion and Society in Ceylon."¹⁵

Ames critiques Singer's empirical approach as a "simplified view" that ignores "crucial determinates" including "international networks of trade and power." It is these external factors that he views as primary causes of social change. Ames concludes, "Whether or not Indian social institutions facilitate or inhibit rational economic development depends less on the intrinsic nature of those institutions and more on the chain of concrete circumstances, from local to international that envelops them."¹⁶

How does one then process this apparent structural and analytical approach to culture change and by extension the museum revolution of the late 1980-s that Ames helped champion? Was Ames more correctly a Weberian analyst of

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organizational ideal types or a case-study empiricist led by inductive impulses? Museums were more than anything, an institution to Ames. Rather than accepting the existence of this institution unproblematically (as Weber might accept bureaucracies as inevitable), Ames entertained (but did not directly seek...) a radical shift in the purpose of the museum. A 1993 working paper stated boldly, "Equal collaboration [between an institution and the peoples it represents]...will require the restructuring of the entire enterprise and its value system in order to recognize the primal and sovereign status of first Peoples and their right to the possibility of radically different claims to truth, beauty, and the exhibition thesis"¹⁷ (I love those pairing of terms...). He ends the paper in short order though with an assertion of a seemingly opposite claim - that the foundational doctrines of museums such as liberalism and empiricism should remain intact, "for all their limitations and contradictions" as a type of "cleansing process to which all ideologies should be subjected."¹⁸

The answer to the question of Ames's ultimate positioning is found, I think, by looking more carefully at the components of his "detrribalized anthropology" and how he put these premises to use. To summarize, Ames cites three

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major themes as crucial to a detribalized mentality: 1) the influence of Western education as a central modernizing factor leading to 'compromise formations' which are nevertheless also 'traditional,'"¹⁹; 2) the necessity of economic independence as a precursor to self-determined actions and; 3) the existence of what he termed an "inner-centered form of development" independent of the imposition of an external vision.²⁰ This last criterion is seen to be structurally hampered by the frequency with which a "patron client system" becomes ingrained even in indigenous arenas. His full statement is "Once a group can become economically independent then it perhaps can set its own agenda. The danger is, however, that in the process of becoming economically independent they become so accustomed to the patron client system that they are no longer able to become psychologically independent."²¹ Ames's concern is the potential for internalized colonialization, an insightful perspective for the time frame in which he was writing.

It is this "inner-centered form of development" that I take to be the highest good of his detribalized philosophy - a liberatory repossession of the past as indicative of cultural autonomy. Ames called this "a theory of cultural creativity and cultural policy." This desired autonomy is

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hampered though by internalized socialization to prevailing norms, conceptualized as an inevitable flow to the center.

Citing Weber, Ames describes how:

...great revolutionary and religious movements tended to originate in the regions, in opposition to the centre, which by its nature tends to be more self-absorbed, monopolistic, cautious and involuted. Eventually, of course regional creative impulses flow to the centre where many of them, in their turn, become conservative and involuted. What is important is to maintain a steady flow of creativity, from the regions to the centre and back again to the regions.²²

In his hesitancy to abandon the museum enterprise or anthropology, on the surface Ames seems resigned to the structural premises of Weber that dictate the never-ending reproduction of bureaucracies - the conservative and involuted centre. Weber's analysis appears congruent with the cultural policies Ames observes:

When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own which is equally subject to the process of bureaucratization."²³

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Do indigenous museum practices seek only to reproduce the hierarchial, bureaucratic formulation of museums that they once challenged as non-inclusive or are other curatorial models available? Can this new museology really only go so far as to simply "balance[ing]non-native curators with Native consultants, like counterpoising so many cowboys and Indians"?²⁴ The reproduction of constrictive ideologies is in Ames's words "a dismal view of history" but one for which it is possible to "break out of..."²⁵ In the fashion of a Michael Ames analysis, I wish to offer an applied example to illustrate how this potential self-colonization in museum practices might be overcome.

The Poolaw Photography Project initiated at Stanford University in 1989 sought to print, archive and interpret the historic legacy of Horace Poolaw, Kiowa photographer (1906-1984). The initial project was led by Horace Poolaw's daughter Linda Poolaw who oversaw the printing of her father's negatives by Stanford University students. Many of Poolaw's images had never been developed previously due to a lack of resources, making the project a personal and moving journey for all involved. The final printed images were then reproduced in quantity and returned to the source

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community at Carnegie, Oklahoma, where elders and other tribal members provided oral histories for project members, both students and researchers, in direct response to the returned photographs in a variant of a photo elicitation technique. The Poolaw images were literally repatriated to the Kiowa community through this curatorial process. Their original alienation was not due to circumstances whereby the photographs were collected by non-Indians for a distant repository but by a lack of time, resources and skills needed to adequately print, reproduce and disseminate the materials to their community of origin.

I present the Poolaw Project as an example of indigenous curation methodology due to its utilization of the core premises I was taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum Training Program. These are: 1) mentorship, a concern with transfer of skills and an opportunity to prove those skills, 2) shared power, the absence of hierarchical or supervisory management, 3) reciprocity, a redistribution of resources and 4) a moral basis for the work, not economically-driven. This indigenous reconstruction of the museum enterprise has relevance to the "new museology" Ames championed in that bureaucratic structures are largely absent and the "higher ground" mentality of principled

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human and collective rights is championed. Importantly however, colonial aspects are also present, specifically the educational and economic determinants that are essential to the curatorial enterprise. The technical knowledge of image production and reproduction was an essential precursor to the Poolaw Project as was the economic support provided by Stanford University and their sponsors.

The self-reproducing qualities of the museum enterprise as a rational bureaucracy have the potential to exist only in light of the material constraints required to conduct curatorial work - namely education and economic support. Ames was correct, then, in his Weberian analysis that the structural grid of capitalism and bureaucracy continues to hold sway over the employment of local knowledge inherent in indigenous curatorial practice. However, it is also the institutionalization (Stanford University) and technology (digitization) that enable the curatorial project. Structural considerations are therefore both constricting and liberating in their effect.

The reconstruction of the past is necessarily caught up in the reconquest of indigenous curatorial efforts as

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educational and economic determinants influence Native museum practitioners. Ames's theory of cultural policy allows Native museum professionals to "break out of" this "dismal view of history" so that the endlessly bureaucratic and oppressive museum enterprise need not necessarily be self-perpetuating. Given the right educational supports (and by right I mean post-colonial) and sufficient economic capital (always the biggest challenge in the arts and heritage industries), an ethical inclusive museum methodology can be achieved. A detribalization of the indigenous mind is the necessary premise for this still-evolving "new museology," not the liberation of anthropological constructs.

¹ I was fortunate to have been awarded a National Science Foundation Minority Graduate Fellowship in 1990 that enabled my internship at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology.

² Ames, Michael M. 1964. Buddha and the Dancing Goblins: A Theory of Magic and Religion. *American Anthropologist New Series*, 66 (1): 75-82. Ames, Michael M. 1967. The Impact of Western Education on Religion and Society in Ceylon. *Pacific Affairs* 40 (1/2): 19-42. Ames, Michael M. 1964. Magical-animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23: 21-52.

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³ Ames, Michael M. 1976. Detribalized Anthropology and the Study of Asian Civilizations. *Pacific Affairs*. 49(2): 313-324.

⁴ Ames, Michael M. 1986. *Museums, The Public, and Anthropology: A Study in the Anthropology of Anthropology*. New Delhi: Concept Pub. Co. (Later revised as *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*. 1992. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.)

⁵ Ames. 1976. p. 324.

⁶ Ames, Michael. 1988. Daring to Be Different: An Alternative. *MUSE*. Spring:38-42.

⁷ Ames. 1976. p. 321.

⁸ Ames. 1976. p. 323.

⁹ Ames. 1987. Free Indians From Their Ethnological Fate: The Emergence of the Indian Point of View in Exhibitions of Indians. *MUSE*. Summer:14.

¹⁰ Ames. 1976. p. 317.

¹¹ Singer, Milton. 1972. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*. New York: Praeger Publishers.

¹² Ames. 1976. p. 324.

¹³ Ames. 1987. Free Indians From Their Ethnological Fate: The Emergence of the Indian Point of View in Exhibitions of Indians. *MUSE*. Summer:14-18.

¹⁴ Ames. 1976. p. 322.

¹⁵ Ames, Michael M. 1967. The Impact of Western Education on Religion and Society in Ceylon. *Pacific Affairs*. 40 (1/2): 19-42.

¹⁶ Ames. 1976. p. 319.

¹⁷ Ames. 1993. "The Politics of Difference: Other Voices in a Not Yet Post-Colonial World" pp.21-22. Paper given at the panel "The Many Voices of Representation in Museum Exhibitions and Publications," chaired by Margot Blum Schevill and Aldona Jonaitis at the American Ethnological Society-Council for Museum Anthropology 1993 Spring Meeting, Art and Goods, Santa Fe, NM April 15-18.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁹ Ames. 1976. p. 322.

²⁰ Ames. 1991. Letter to Mitchell (Mithlo) February 13.

²¹ Ibid.

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²² Ames, Michael. 1988. Daring to Be Different: An Alternative. *MUSE*.
Spring:41-42.

²³ Weber, Max. 1921/1968. *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*. Max
Rheinstein (ed.). Translated by Edward Shils and Max Rheinstein. New
York: Simon and Schuster.

²⁴ Ames. 1993. p. 21.

²⁵ Ames. 1991. Letter to Mitchell (Mithlo) February 13.

A helpful site in accessing Weber quotes for the preparation of this
talk was: Elwell, Frank, 1996, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, Retrieved
November 26, 2007,
<http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome.htm>